

Our Weakness, God's Strength  
2 Cor. 12:2-10  
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On our mission trip to New Orleans, one of the things we did each night was have some group reflection time. Because of the kind of work we were doing in such hot temperatures, this time was important for us to decompress and reflect on each day's events.

We started off our time together with something called "Highs and Lows." We would go around the circle and each person would share one high and one low from the day. The lows were usually related to the heat or how we all smelled, and the highs were usually related to how much work got done or how people were helping each other. Sometimes, a person's high and low were the same thing. For example, it was fun to do demolition work, but with each swing of the crowbar you were tearing down a wall that used to have family pictures hanging on it.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul is sharing with the church in Corinth some of the highs and lows of his life. In fact, he tells them that one of the things most people would consider a low – the thorn in his flesh – is actually a high.

Paul is forced into this "high and low" session by some of the events that have occurred in the Corinthian church. Paul founded this church on one of his missionary journeys. As a church planter, Paul would get the church going, and then would move onto the next town to start another one. After starting the church in Corinth, he moved on to Ephesus. While there, he heard about some problems back in Corinth, so he wrote a letter – what we know as I Corinthians – to clear things up.

Well, he didn't hear back from them after that letter, so he sent his helper Timothy to check things out. Timothy returned to tell Paul about serious problems in Corinth, including a group of false teachers who had infiltrated the church and were undermining Paul's teaching and undoing all the good work he had done there. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls these people "super-apostles" and "Satan's ministers."

These teachers were very seductive and were luring people away from the true gospel and the Corinthian church. They claimed to have something special that few others, including Paul, had – they had experienced visions and revelations of the secret mysteries of God, which gave them special insight and spiritual wisdom, like they'd won God's lottery. Because Paul never claimed to have these, they said Paul wasn't truly spiritual, and his teachings weren't worthy of attention.

We've probably run into people like this before, people who put prerequisites on having faith. You don't really have faith unless you've spoken in tongues or wave your hands in the air during worship. Some folks try to apply human criteria to deciding who's in and who's out in God's kingdom, but I've never found that list in the Bible. Of course, someone may say that's proof my faith is deficient because I don't know the Bible well enough. But as I read it, the only criteria God puts on faith is belief in Jesus. If you've confessed that you accept Christ as your Lord and Savior, you get your set of keys to the kingdom.

Paul wanted that to be good enough for the Corinthians, but obviously some of them were pressing Paul for more proof of his faithfulness. So against his better judgment, he shares with them his own experience of visions and revelations. Paul deflects some of his self-promotion by addressing this event in the third person: "I know a man." But he's talking about himself. He's basically saying to the Corinthians, "You want visions and revelations? You think that's what makes or breaks someone's faith? OK, I've got a few of those." And he tells them about being swept up into the third heaven and being caught up in paradise and hearing inexpressible things, things he's not permitted to tell.

Now, if Paul stopped here, he's won. He's defeated the false teachers in the game of, "Who's Revelation Is Better?" If this were a watermelon seed-spitting contest, Paul just really let one fly. But faith is not a contest. Paul knows that a person's faith shouldn't be judged by how ecstatic their visions are or how many times they've been swept up in the spirit. Instead, listen to the criteria that Paul subtly lays out: "I refrain from more boasting, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say."

The Bible translation the Message says it this way: "I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the person you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk." In other words, anyone with a mind to do it can act like the perfect Christian for a few moments. "Let me tell you about how hard I worked at the soup kitchen today. Watch me as I put a fat check in the offering plate. Listen to how many times I can quote the Bible in this conversation." Anyone can act like a Christian for a few moments, but when they are only acting, the spotlight is on themselves instead of God. They are saying, "Look how good I am," instead of saying, "Look how good God is."

But Paul says that we aren't called to be Christians for only a few moments. Sunday morning isn't the only time we should act like we actually like each other and care about the world around us and are trying to be better people today than we were yesterday. Our faith should soak through our words and actions all of the time. If we confess belief in Christ, then we are compelled to live like we mean it: with our families, with our buddies, everywhere. There are no exceptions, not even on the golf course.

Even when we are alone, especially when we are alone, we must live as Christians. Bill Hybels has written a book called, "Who You Are When Nobody's Looking." What kind of judgment does our behavior warrant? If someone watched us for a week, would they come away with the conclusion that we are a person of faith?

Paul knows that being a Christian all of the time is not easy to do, especially when life places obstacles in front of us. Every day for us is filled with highs and lows. So as quickly as Paul names his high, he follows it up with a low: "there was given me a thorn in the flesh." There's been a lot of speculation about what this thorn was: bad eyesight or hearing, malaria, epilepsy. Ultimately, we don't know, and that's OK, because Paul is not focusing on what the thorn is, but on why he has it.

That's important for us to hear, because each of us deals with a thorn in our lives. A sour marriage, a child who isn't doing what we think they should be doing, a job you don't like or a job you wish you had, an illness, depression, financial troubles. One of the things we diverse humans have in common is that our lives are not perfect. Something pierces each one of us and causes us pain. Maybe for a day, or a season, or a lifetime – we all have our thorns.

And we probably have responded the same way Paul did. He says that three times he asked God to take it from him. No, not asked, pleaded. You can almost hear it: “Please, God, please, please, please.” I’ve asked God the same thing; you probably have, too. And how does it feel when God doesn’t take it from you? I don’t know about you, but I’ve felt hurt, abandoned, ignored. If God really cared about me, why would He leave me to suffer like this? I thought God had a plan for me.

Paul says that God does have a plan for us, just as God had a plan for him. I asked him to take it away, but instead he said to me: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God answered Paul’s prayer as he answers so many prayers – he did not take the thing away but gave Paul the strength to bear it. That’s how God works; he does not spare us from things, but makes us able to conquer them.

We tend to think of blessings as only good things, when the reality is that many of our blessings come to us through the worst of circumstances. I didn’t learn the true power of prayer until I had people praying for me when I was diagnosed with MS. This past week several people in New Orleans told us how blessed they were that we were there, because it showed to them the reality of God’s love and compassion and grace. We are blessed, not in spite of our thorns, but because of them.

And through God, we are made strong. Having faith in the midst of our weakness is our way of saying, “Look how good God is.” Because we are acknowledging that we simply aren’t strong enough by ourselves to make it. Even the apostle Paul, a giant of faith, says, “I delight in weaknesses, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Pastor Mark Feldmeir says it this way: What Paul said is something so crazy it has to be true. He said, “These are the real signs of God’s presence and power in my life. Not visions and revelations, but that thorn that is there everyday. When I get out of bed and make my coffee, it is there. When I get in the car to go to work, it is there. When I run errands, exercise, pay bills – it is there. And it is there to remind me that I have to depend on God’s grace every day; I can’t go it alone. I can’t make it go away. Instead, I have to turn to God to give me strength to live with it.”

I pray that our highs keep getting higher, our lows not get any lower, and that through it all, we will let see our thorns as proof that we are truly alive, and that we each need God’s grace in our lives. Because God’s grace is sufficient.